

Book 16 - Family

Finding a way out of the corridor, overflowing with countless doors, was quite the arduous task.

"...Here it is."

Walking out the door, which opened soundlessly, I faced a nondescript hallway again. I wondered if Garnet had successfully found the laboratory and joined with the others. It probably was easy since he was always brilliant at locating things. And also, Rikako and Nanseul were carrying out the operation without any problems until just before entering the corridor, so if things went as expected, they should have secured the desired technologies by now or even rescued the children, which Garnet had been hoping for so badly.

However.

For some time now, a mysterious shadow has been hovering over my back. An insight that cannot be accurately explained, or a sixth sense. It would be no exaggeration to say this prognostication has been the leading actor that guides me through my life as a Fixer. The shadow that hung over me since I saw Lapis' image seemed to have become even heavier.

At the Office, I determined that the shadow was probably Garnet's. Even if I could not determine with certainty what or whose light had created the shadow, I could at least guess. Although the majority disagreed, it was ultimately for this reason that I took Garnet on this mission.

If one were to think rationally, leaving Garnet at the Office would have been more apt, wouldn't it? When against the Ring, even more so. Garnet's experience is too lacking for him to fight even a lesser opponent head-on. That said, he is unskilled in hiding his emotions and deceiving his opponents. In fact, the opponent may even seize the opportunity to win by taking advantage of his emotions.

Nevertheless, I've never been comfortable ignoring this sensation that wraps itself around me from the nape of my neck. It was as if something was on my shoulder, pointing out that I should go this way, an abominable but irresistible pressure. I call it "flow". As I continued to live as a Fixer, the pressure became stronger and clearer. Perhaps my accumulated experience overflows instinctively at times like these.

I let Garnet ride on this flow. And now he cruised on the bursting stream.

At least until a while ago.

"...Come out."

But this unwanted shadow that presses on my shoulders now has become a different flow. It is an unpleasant presence with a bloody taste and smell.

I quicken my pace. The identity of the shadow is not far away. I know where it's pointing towards.

"Ahaa... As expected, there was no use in trying to hide from you."

Footsteps are heard in the hallway ahead. They aren't the footsteps of either Garnet, Rikako, or Nanseul. Their owner is much taller than them. The footsteps try to somehow hide their anxiety. But they are not the sounds made by the shoes worn by the Ring. A third party of unknown affiliation.

However, his voice and bloody smell were very familiar.



"....."

"If we've seen each other three times, we must be old acquaintances, no? It seems we have quite a connection."

I believe he was Gubo from N Corp? This was the person I saw at the gallery and at the auction house.

...Is he the new flow?

I need to investigate this sensation of mine more to see how it led me this way.

"Your coat is covered in blood, no?"

"Haa... You're correct, in order to come here I-"

"You killed them all. The auctioneer, the people in the hallway..."

Gubo raised his eyebrows lightly and smiled impishly.

"I thought I'd lower your guard by pretending to be injured, but it seems that didn't work."

"I had a feeling some people were accompanying you."

His smiling mouth was slanted, thin, and long.

"Well... In a battle, there are always losses. I was just lucky and didn't suffer any."

He doesn't really look like it. His gloves are clean without a trace of battle, and his coat is stained with blood but does not appear to be torn or ripped in any way.

He must be standing here in exchange for the lives of those who accompanied him. They fought while he hid himself.

"There was no other way to get in here. I didn't want to break any of the rules of the auction, but you put me in a tight spot."

He spoke in a very resentful tone.

He seems to be referring to the last art piece... if you can call it that, for which we won the bidding and received Jumsoon's invitation. Just before that, he had offered 10 billion Ahn for it as if it were nothing. No one at the auction house was surprised to hear that amount, but perhaps he was planning to forge a connection with Jumsoon through that huge deal. In addition, one could conclude that there was a fairly pressing reason for him to make a breakthrough with Jumsoon, seeing as he was offering such a sum of money.

"Oh, I don't want to blame you. Don't misunderstand."

The fact that he didn't raise an eyebrow despite raising a sum of money great enough to upset all those who'd enjoy an upper-class lifestyle.

The fact that he could smile unconcernedly despite having killed all the 20-plus people in the auction house.

The emotional turmoil of fighting against the Ring, including some Docents, couldn't have been small at all.

Even so, he's able to keep his composed expression and even joke about it.

But a feeling of insecurity, obsession, and yearning can be seen reflected through it.

He is a person willing to pay any price for the sake of his goal. He's constantly calculating ways to reach it, even if it means deferring the consequent emotions and conduct.

...So this is how this flow goes, huh.

"I suppose you showed yourself because you want something."

"Tell me what your original goal was. It would be wise to tell the truth."

His glasses momentarily glint in the light. His expression shows I finally got through to him.

"Haha, do you think I would have a reason to lie?"

The bloodstains hardened on his glasses make it appear as if their blood-red color is dwelling in his eyes.

"They've stolen a valuable asset. We just came to look for it. To ask for it back."

He seems nonchalant as if he has come to retrieve a tool he loaned. But I also sense a smoldering heat deep within. It doesn't seem to be a material asset.

...The image of the laboratory from the videotape flashed through my mind.

"What is that asset?"

"...I guess there's no good reason to dare hide from the Red Gaze. It's a researcher called Aseah. It takes an extraordinary amount of gusto to steal a scientist who reports directly to a Director, you know?"

It didn't seem like he was lying. He must have known exactly what would happen when a lie is exposed before me, and he must have calculated that it would be to his advantage to tell the truth.

I, too, calculated the value of my next question.

"Which Director of N Corp?"

If he was a target of little value, killing him here and now wouldn't have been a problem. But an intriguing word came forth.

The Board of Directors of N Corp. Various personalities come to mind, but I'm not sure they strut around this much...

"Director Herman, perhaps?"

"...I'm surprised. It seems I shouldn't open my mouth so carelessly."

If the Ring are those who believe only in what they see, then N Corp is a company obsessed with being seen. Is it any wonder then that their pursuits overlap with those of the Ring?

If Herman instructed this man to come in and retrieve the researcher, there is a high probability that he's involved with that lab.

...Garnet is going to love this.

"...Are you trying to add a new feature to the suicide vending machine?"

Gubo's eyes narrow.

"It's difficult for me to say more. It seems you know that anyway."

No matter how hard I tried to conceal it, I couldn't hide a momentary feeling of mine. That being relief.

The suicide vending machine, one of the leading symbols of N Corp, has received countless condemnations and amazements from other Nests. But at the same time, it's an open fact that it is the main source of income and culture for N Corp. It's impossible to estimate how many people move from their Nests to N Corp's to use the suicide vending machines. It is still considered to be a unique structure only of N Corp...

I can pretend to know or not know what his ulterior motives are, but either way, this must be quite a difficult subject.

"I have revealed all that I can reveal about this. We have different reasons, but our destination is the same, so why not accompany each other?"

Although the subject matter was a proposal, it was practically a plea. He knew very well that if I didn't accompany him, there would be nothing waiting for him but death. I stared him down, uncaring.

"You are thinking about how to use me, aren't you?"

He read my expression and promptly spoke up. This man is skilled in savvy thinking. He reads the situation and reacts swiftly based on the pieces he has on the table. Therefore, I decided to wait a little longer. Until he shows me the last move he has.

"In that case, let me make another offer."

I nodded, allowing him to continue.

"Isn't the purpose of your coming here, after all... also due to this glass technology being developed by the Ring? Because it seems that rumors are already circulating that a new Singularity will be observed by the Ring."

I replied neither in the affirmative nor in the negative. I did so to make him believe he got it right.

"That technology... is called glass?"

"Correct. If all goes well, maybe Aseah and I can give you some of the materials that are produced by the apparatus."

"....."

"Now, isn't this enough to close our settlement?"

I think back to my memory of the videotape.

With the cooperation of Aseah, who seemed to be overseeing the experiment, the necessary materials could be easily secured. That was the initial goal of our Office.

In addition, we could even account for the safe removal of the children from the experimental equipment.

That'll make ends meet.

"Alright. Shall I accompany you?"

"Very good. I can assure you of the material's value..."

"Just give me everything. And then destroy all that is left. Make it seem as if nothing ever existed there in the first place."

For the first time, his face grew dark.

I wondered if he would make a face like that once the math stopped adding up.

"Isn't that demand outrageous? What are we supposed to take back?"

"Wasn't your Corp's goal only to secure Aseah in the first place? The collateral seems to be what you desire."

"...For someone who speaks so confidently, you seem to be empty-handed, don't you?"



He was very quick and deft with his hands, arming himself and closing the distance between us.

A karambit. A weapon suitable for cutting, clawing, and ripping. Furthermore, if you put your finger in the loop on the end of the handle and grip it, you can prevent yourself from mistakenly letting go of the weapon.

However.

"Ah..."

That would only happen if you can reach the enemy.

As expected, Gubo's combat experience was not extensive enough to feign proficiency.

Garnet wouldn't have fought like this, thrusting his weapon forward before even being near his opponent.

(Crack-)

The arm, thrust out unskillfully, was no different from an ingredient prepared for easy cooking, and the joint, broken as naturally as flowing water, eventually dropped its weapon to the floor.

His pupils narrowed as if he hadn't calculated this scenario.
Or perhaps he was gasping in pain.

"Guh!"

So too did his throat, as the space for breathing narrowed and became obstructed.

"It seems you may have been slightly mistaken in your calculations."



I told Gubo as he looked back at me, his neck strangled by my right hand, dangling in mid-air.

"The value of your suggestion is worth this much."

I squeezed his throat a little tighter until it blocked the grunts he was barely able to spit out.

"Only enough for me to not put any more force."

After a moment, I relax my hand, and he falls to the floor, coughing violently.

"Your reckoning... cough... is cruel to the point of being tight-fisted, isn't it..."

"It's a privilege of being a Color."

"Haha... only joking..."

"Now then... You don't even know where the location of the laboratory is, and I'm quite sure the price of my guidance will be substantial."

Gubo, who was stroking his neck and straightening his wrinkled collar, stared at me.

"You already knew?"

"Yeah, so just follow me quietly."

"...It would only be polite for those defeated in calculations to surrender. I'll do as you please."

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Only my and Gubo's footsteps echo in the corridor. There was no sign of anyone. Gubo tried to talk to me, perhaps not liking the atmosphere.

"Incidentally, did you let your colleague go to the lab first?"

"....."

"That being the kid whose eyes went like saucers when I stated my amount."

"...Yeah, he ought to be together with my Office's family."

"Family, eh...that sounds good. It's also a word that doesn't fit you terribly well."

I was bothered by the fact that he was acting like a know-it-all, even though we had only just met, but I couldn't deny it. Family was not a word I typically used. Garnet or Yen, and occasionally Denver, would use it in passing. Rikako said it was strange and showed some signs of displeasure, but soon got used to it, and Nanseul would laugh quietly, as usual.

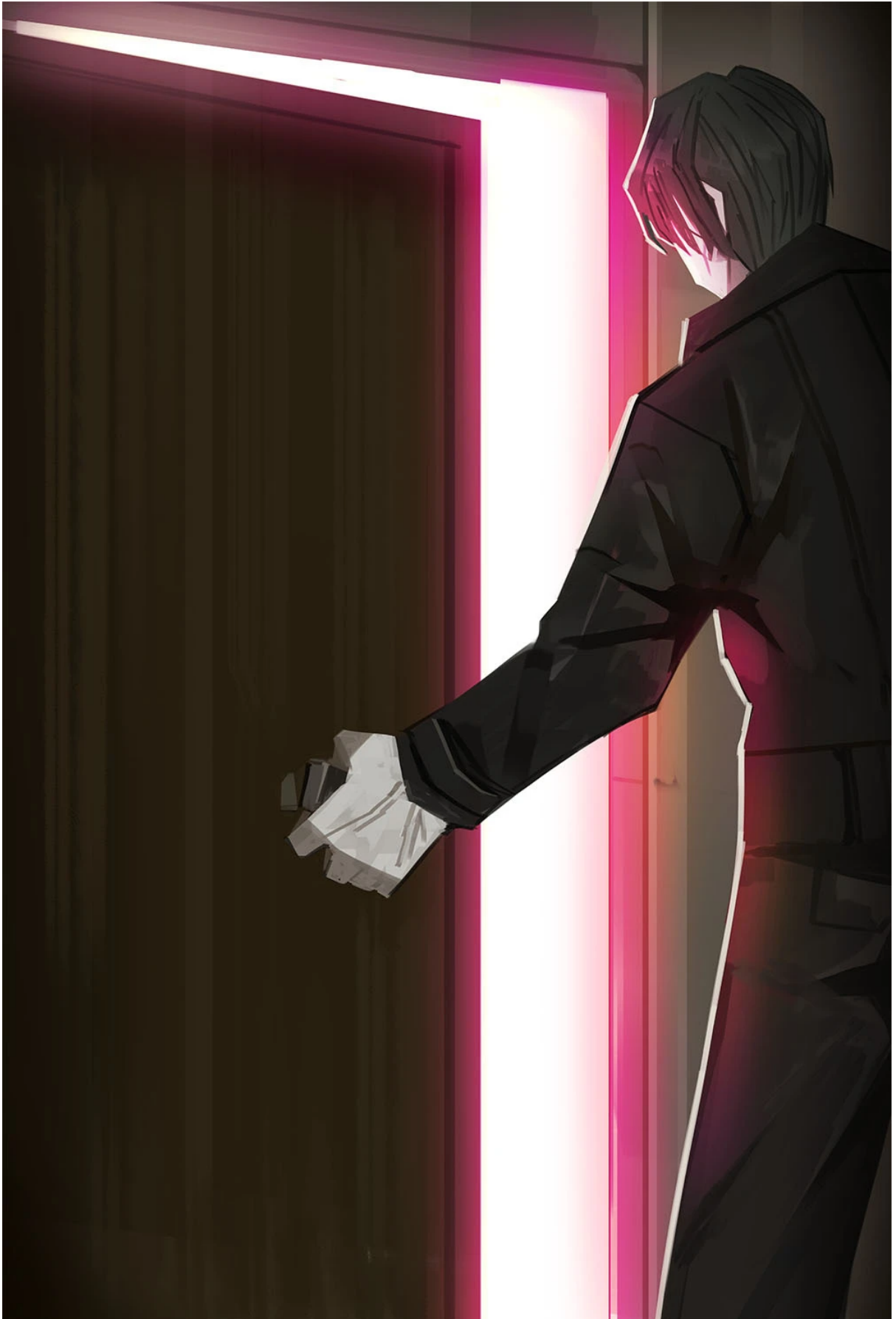
"Sitting around the table and eating together every day, isn't that what family is all about?"

I recall Garnet murmuring to a disapproving Rikako as he puffed up. Things that I had casually passed by at the time began to sting and cling to me like a prick in my throat.

Sometimes I suddenly remember things like this when I'm alone amidst the silence.

Maybe I haven't yet been able to expel my emotions.

"Oh, I see we've arrived."



We stopped in front of a door.

Eyes, sculptures. And glass.

I repeat in my mind the mental cipher Lan gave me, then I pulled the handle, opening the door lightly.

I see the hallway to the laboratory, and beyond it, I see people lying on the floor, having breathed their last. They were of the Ring. I felt relief for some reason. There could be no more certain proof that Garnet had found and entered the lab safely.

"I'm surprised to learn that kid had more basic skills than I'd expected. At first, I wondered why you would bring here a naive little boy."

Gubo pretended as if he was in marvel. I did not respond. There was no need to express my feelings.

Indeed, I might have been in a hurry.

And I also dimly realized that I get quite emotional when something involves Garnet. Maybe he realized it but pretended not to know. I had no idea how loose I might have gotten, given that I didn't hide the proud look on my face.

"....."

However, I heard no sound where there should have been one.

I am sure I should be able to hear Garnet, Nanseul, and Rikako's voices here.

"...Can you hear the crying? It's like..."

Soon Gubo's words stopped.

"....."

Why did my flow always point to the wrong place? Why did this shadow go toward the ruins instead of the peaceful valley beyond the mountains?

But it was always in ruination where success was buried.

Did I not move along with the shadow sitting on my shoulder, knowing it was towards ruin?

Perhaps I thought it might have been different this time.

...That Garnet's shadow would never become this dark.

"Is that the 'family' you mentioned?"



Cries are bubbling up in the laboratory. Abysses were crawling across the floor that could only be found in the Outskirts and Ruins. It would be better to give up mentioning them any further.

And in the center of it all, there was a red jewel shining alone.

Where have I seen this color before? The color that covers the sky when the sun sets over the mountains in the west.

No, the color of a bruise on a shredded chest.

No, it's the color of a fruit that ripened and ripened until it finally burst open.

There lay Garnet.

I knew it without gazing at it, without peering into it.

That Garnet was in that gemstone of a color exceedingly similar to that of my name.

"...Ha."

I wonder if the unfathomable gravity pressing down on you was too much for you to handle. The faces of the children waiting for their presents at the orphanage suddenly came to mind.

...At some point, my flow stagnated.

There was definitely a slow flow caught in my gaze. If I had let that flow carry me along, I am sure I could have turned the City itself upside down.

But I deliberately ignored that flow. Instead, I tried to accompany the dim flow that hung unto my shoulders and back.

Because that flow was my flow, and I would have been able to control it.

And because that slow but brightly colored flow and I were so different in nature.

Perhaps when I led that shadow toward the bright, it would be filled with light.

That's what I thought.

However, shadows are only black, and they can never shine white by any means.

After all, shadows are created by blocking out light.

Thus.

This time, too, I arrived at a ruin, a corner of hell.

And for the first time, I realized that the shadow on my back was pointing in the direction of a sluggish flow. That if I went any further in the direction of this flow, I would never be able to return.

I should stop. This is not a job of saving the children for Garnet's sake.

I can't choose a flow any longer, I can see only myself getting swept away in them.

Because of this life I've grown so accustomed to.

Because I cannot ever break.

I just can't.

I can only watch the wailing reflected in front of me.

Amidst the wailing, I can sometimes see it crumbling,
My family's struggle.

Translated by @SnakeskinFS